

Panax blasts 'lynch-law justice' of news council; breaks off contact

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McGoff and the National News Council was triggered when the council denounced him last July for "autocratic ownership" of his newspapers.

A month earlier, the editor of a Panax newspaper in Escanaba, Mich. resigned and the editor of a Panax daily in Marquette, Mich. was fired after each balked at running stories they considered irresponsible journalism.

The stories, written by former bureau chief for New York for Panax, George Bernard, insinuated that President Carter condoned promiscuity among his staff and that he was grooming his wife for the vice presidency.

The stories were distributed from Panax headquarters here in East Lansing to Panax editors, who were urged to give them good play in their papers. Panax owns seven dailies and 43 weeklies. McGoff owns two dailies and 14 weeklies through a separate company in California.

THE NATIONAL News Council, after taking a telephone poll of its members, then denounced McGoff for dictating that those stories be run.

McGoff objected to the denunciation and asked for an open hearing on the matter. The council set a date for the hearing in August, but didn't conduct it because Panax later said it wouldn't attend unless certain demands were met first.

Panax insisted that the council retract its denunciation because it was done hastily, without getting Panax' side of the issue and in violation of the council's rules of procedure. It also demanded that council chairman Norman Isaacs abstain from all council matters concerning Panax.

IN MID-SEPTEMBER, the council met and set the Oct. 19 date for a hearing on the issue, whether or not McGoff or a surrogate attends.

It also expressed its confidence in Isaacs and endorsed the methods—a telephone vote instead of a hearing—it used to obtain its resolution denouncing McGoff.

In a statement last week, McGoff said, "We did, and do, welcome a full and fair airing of the facts of that dispute by any impartial panel. But we cannot trust an organization which showed so little regard for fair play in formulating charges and then when reminded how flagrantly it had disregarded its own rules, made matters worse by saying it routinely ignores those rules.

"That, pure and simple, is lynch-law 'justice,'" he said.

McGoff also insists now that neither of the editors left the papers for objecting to the two Bernard articles.

"Attempts were made then, and the lie has been repeated since, to make it appear that they had been fired for 'refusing' to publish stories sent to them from corporate headquarters. No Panax editor was fired then, or since, on such grounds.

"The man who resigned, a good editor, did so in what could only be described as an internal misunderstanding. The man who was fired was fired because he flat-out refused to accept the principle that the chain of command, the authority which matches the responsibility, ends at the top in editorial affairs just as it does in other matters."

However, this doesn't sound like the story McGoff was telling before the news council denunciation.

He told Publishers' Auxiliary that the editor's refusal to run the stories was a simple "issue of insubordination. I think as publisher and president of this organization I have the authority to determine that if I want something in I'm going to get it in. I don't think the subjective thinking of an editor should stand in a publisher's way when he wants to print something.

Also, in an article published in the Escanaba Daily Press on July 2, McGoff wrote about the "firing of two editors" and stated, "Regardless of the merits or demerits of the Bernard columns, and whether the two dismissed editors agreed with the content, it should have had no bearing on their willingness to include such columns in the paper's content.... It is my view that these two editors are the epitome of arrogance to have their jobs rather than to participate in the dissemination of ideas contrary to their own...."